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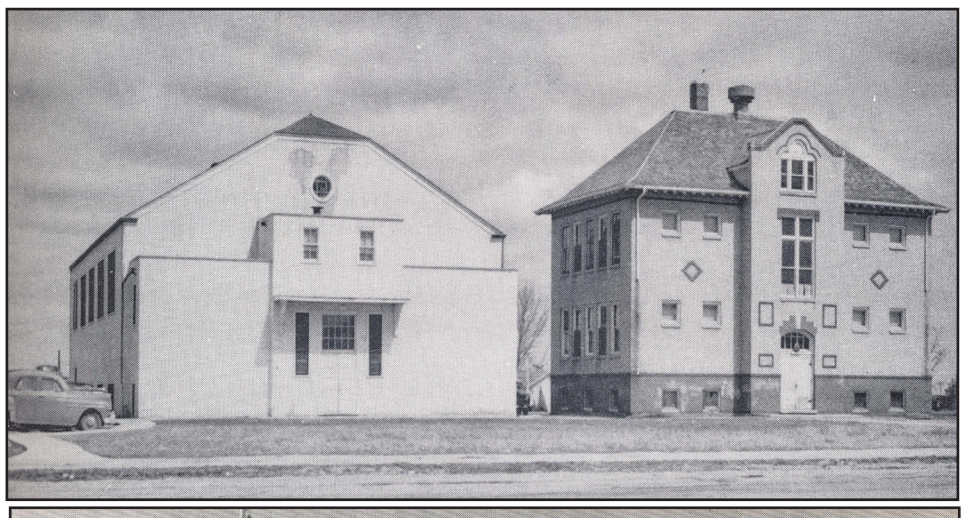
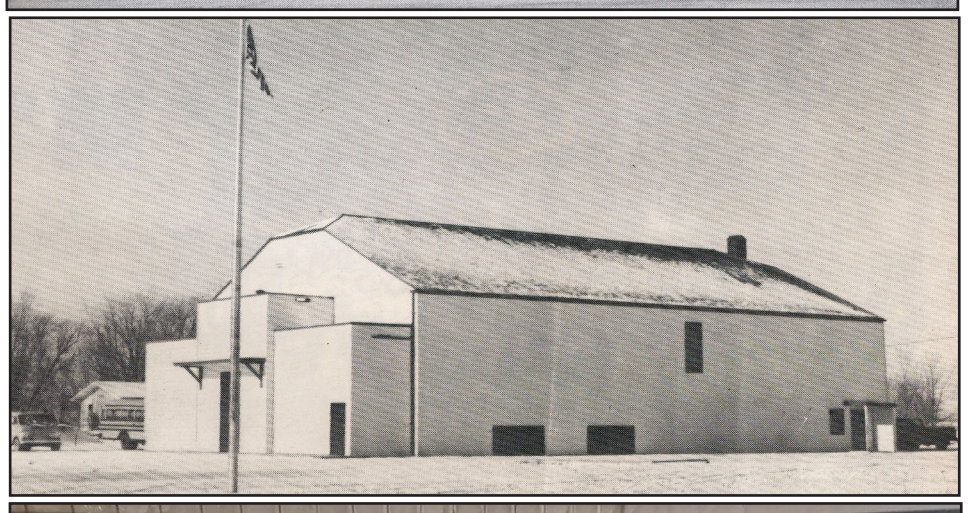
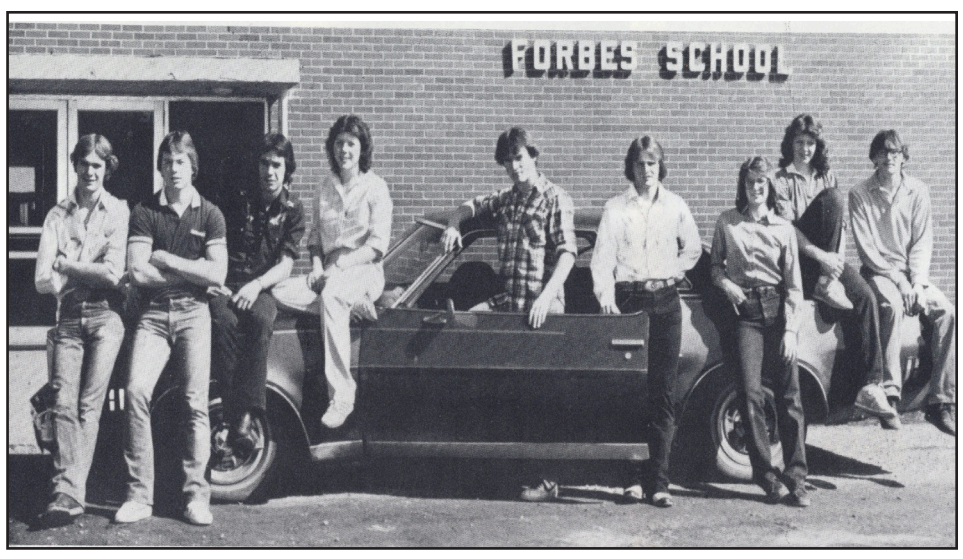
Remembering the Forbes School and Gym Forbes, North Dakota, 1910-2020



The original brick building (top left) was used from 1910 to 1961. The gym was completed in 1939. After a 1959 consolidation of area township schools, work began on the low red brick structure on the east side of the grounds. After the school closed in 1987, efforts were made to keep up the buildings, but they proved inadequate, and decay set in.



This kindergarten class (1962) got to learn in the brand new red brick building. From left around the table are Dennis Wall, Sherry Carter, Mrs. Marvick, Karen Berheim, Susan Hauck, Cindy Turnwall, Jackie Martin, Debbie Docktor, Konnie Berheim, Ruth VanKempen, Cindy Merkel, Marty Casey, John Pitz, and Peggy Zahn. Mary Beth Pratschner was also in the class, but is not pictured.



1982 Forbes Seniors showing their style in front of the red brick building (l-r): Dan Rall, Tim Guenther, Bernie Rall, Joan Flakoll, Todd Anliker, Lloyd Brokaw, Carolyn Wolff, Melba Brandenburger, and Ross Merkel. Below, Lonnie Newman Wagner reminisces on a 2018 visit.

by Ken Smith

Residents of Forbes and the surrounding area said goodbye this April to a landmark that played a central role in their community for most of its 115-year history. Long-armed excavators mashed in the roof of the old gymnasium, turning its timbers into a tangle of big toothpicks. Pieces of steel siding (dating back to 1976) were strewn around. Then the machines turned their attention toward the flat-roofed elementary school, ready to reduce its walls to piles of red brick and assorted rubble.

The Forbes school was born in 1905, with the town. It started in a little white building, packed with 23 students of all ages. The older students were soon moved to the hall in the upstairs of the Sager General Store. Then, in 1910, all the students relocated to a new two-and-a half story brick structure, which would serve for the next 51 years.

On June 30, 1939 the community dedicated, with great joy, a full-sized gymnasium on the west side of that building. Funding and building assistance had come from the federal WPA (Works Progress Administration). To economize, the residents chose simple architecture. They used a great deal of salvaged lumber from the defunct flour mill in Ellendale. But the results were satisfying. As a student athlete from the 1950s recalls, the Forbes gym was one of the best in the county. "I'd love to have that floor for my house," said a 1973 graduate, commenting on the finely finished basketball plying surface. "It really was beautiful."

In 1959, the same year Virgil Newman coached his second girl's basketball team to the state championship, the Forbes school received students from six consolidating townships. Lack of space and an aging building prompted a major construction project. Two years later, doors opened on a sparkling, modern single-level red-brick school. The Forbes school was again up to date.

There is no way to accurately count the number of students who attended school at Forbes between 1905 and the ultimate closing of the school in 1987. But the town's Centennial book lists the names of 369 students who received High school diplomas on those once bustling grounds. Though most are far from Forbes, loyal graduates of the school are easy to find.

One of them, 1951 graduate Vernard Brendenburger, told a touching story of how he became a high school student. Vernard went through his rural school, but he lived many miles from town and there was no bus service. His father didn't think high school was necessary, and besides the 17-year old's help was needed on the farm.

But Forbes principal Virgil Newman visited the family and talked at length about the value of a high school education. Newman made special concessions to allow time off for harvest and planting. He promised to do anything possible to help Vernard complete his studies, despite missing more days than a typical town student would lose. "Mr. Newman was the one who convinced my father that I had to go," said Vernard, who remains grateful to have gotten the chance. "I really looked up to Virgil Newman."

Vernard graduated in 1951, and remained loyal to the school, serving for many years on its board. The building he'd attended even became part of his everyday life, after he took down the condemned 1910 structure and built a machine shed with the lumber. He used some of the brick and metal to create a fireplace. And all of his children attended the Forbes school.

In 1979 Vernard's youngest daughter Sheila was married, and a big wedding dance was held in the gym, under the new roof he had installed not long before that.

The gym was used for all kinds of events, not just P.E. and basketball. Dances were frequent. The dedication of the gym on June 30, 1939, which drew an estimated 2,500, included an "old time" dance with an 11-member orchestra called the "Royal Filipinos." In addition to countless athletic contests and PE classes, the building would see lots of all-school assemblies, band and choral performances, commencements, plays and more. Joanne Brokaw, who was a little girl when the gym was built, remembers that the gym hosted roller skating events, until concerns were raised about damage to the hardwood playing floor. Joanne also recalls "quite a few movies" being shown there. The building hosted many community meetings and meals, wedding and baby showers, and family reunions. A group of local men formed a shooting club and used the basement as a shooting range. They installed a specially designed "bullet catcher" behind the targets to catch the little .22 caliber slugs. No larger ammunition was allowed, and shooting was entirely off-limits during school hours and school events.

In 1987 Forbes High School graduated its last class. Vernard, who was on the school board that last year, was among the majority who felt the classes were too small to justify maintaining an entire school system. Subsequently, Forbes area students would attend Ellendale Public School, though some would go to Frederick, and a few to Ashley.

After the school was closed, some locals thought it might be wise to sell the buildings. Others were intent on keeping them. For some years they were kept in shape, and they did see use. But without funding and regular maintenance, they fell into disrepair. The flat roof on the red brick structure started seeping water. In several places, collapse soon followed. In recent years, a walk around the building revealed sunlight shining through open ceilings and scatterings of tiles and other debris in the halls. Small trees (and a few big ones) erupted in classrooms where students once gathered around reading tables.

The 1939 gym fared better, largely because of a late 1970s re-roofing. It remained usable for pick-up basketball for many years. Those who attended the Forbes centennial in 2005 found their gym clean and inviting, with electricity and running water. But as time passed without regular attention, the inside became dusty and rather dreary. In June 2018, 1960 graduate Lonnie Newman Wagner (the daughter of Principal Virgil Newman) took several friends on a memory tour. The flooring at the front entry was coming apart. Large brown mold spots had grown on the ceiling. Parts of it were falling down.

Nevertheless, the building still showed character. "Home of the Forbes Hi-Liners" was still emblazoned overhead in bold blue letters. The floor was solid and the beams were straight. And the memories, if not completely intact, were still sturdy.

Lonnie stood for a moment in the shadows beneath a backboard that hung, minus the hoop, in front of the stage. Out loud, she reminisced about long practices and exciting games, and about her beloved teammates, family, and fellow students. The curtains above the platform, were still in place, straight and dignified, as if open for performers who would never again step in front of an audience here.

Forbes New High School Gymnasium Ranks With Finest in Territory from the Dickey County Leader, July 6, 1939.

Approximately 2500 persons attended the dedication ceremonies of the new Forbes High School gymnasium Friday, according to those who were present.

The large audience which packed the auditorium also enjoyed several numbers played by the Forbes High school band and other musical numbers including vocal and piano selections. Other entertainment during the day included an old-time dance during the afternoon which was well patronized, a softball game between Forbes and Frederick, in which Forbes defeated their opponents by an 8 to 3 score.

The dance in the evening was one of the most successful events of the celebration, with music being furnished by the Eleven Filipinos. Jansen's Midway Shows provided entertainment all day.

The new gymnasium, which now stands just west of the Forbes high school compares favorably with any in the surrounding towns. With a stucco finish in the outside, it measures 56x100 feet with full basement.

The stage is 18x30 feet while the door space is 42x72. The ceiling and upper walls are finished with new wood laid over a firm board wall to stand heavy usage and a wainscoating finish is used on the lower walls. Lighting fixtures with guards have been installed and the bleachers, which will accommodate 400 people, are in place.

Forbes is to be complimented on this excellent structure which will be complete in every detail when school opens this fall.